

LochteGate

Ryan Lochte's career establishes him as one of America's greatest swimmers. He was a two-time NCAA Swimmer of the Year, a 24-time NCAA All-American, and a 7-time NCAA champion. He won twelve Olympic swimming medals, including the second most individual swimming medals of all time in Men's swimming. At the Summer Olympics in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Lochte won his final gold medal as a member of the USA Men's 4 x 200-meter relay team.

The USA team dominated the medal count in Rio. At the conclusion of the competition, Lochte left the Olympic village to celebrate with three other USA swimmers, including one who was not yet 21 and therefore was forbidden to leave the village.

During the course of their celebration, the four became intoxicated or otherwise impaired, which led to a very unfortunate situation. As reported by The New York Times:

They asked the taxi driver who was returning them to the athletes' village from a party to pull over at a gas station.

What happened next remains murky but involved public urination, vandalism and money changing hands between the swimmers and security guards brandishing weapons.

In Lochte's original account, which he gave in a television interview with NBC the next morning, he said the taxi had been stopped by armed men he believed were police officers, one of whom held a gun against his head before taking cash from his wallet.

His story encapsulated the fears of Olympic visitors and the insecurities of a host city struggling with high crime and gun battles between drug gangs and the police.

After the Brazilian authorities opened their own investigation, Lochte altered his story and acknowledged that he had "overexaggerated," but not before the events had overshadowed the accomplishments of American athletes during the second week of the Games.

The fall-out from Lochte's "overexaggeration," which he made in an interview with Matt Lauer on NBC television, was significant:

- Much of the Brazilian population was outraged by an apparently false charge of crime and police corruption.
- Much anger was expressed at the athletes' apparent display of privilege and disdain for Brazil.
- U.S. Olympic officials issued several apologies for the four athletes' behavior.



- Lochte himself issued multiple apologies, including this one:
- “I wanted to apologize for my behavior last weekend—for not being more careful and candid in how I described the events of that early morning and for my role in taking the focus away from the many athletes fulfilling their dreams of participating in the Olympics.”
- Lochte was charged with providing a false claim of a robbery. The charge was later dismissed on grounds that his actions didn’t rise to the level of filing a false crime report.
- Lochte was accused of being a liar in many news media reports.
- Lochte lost all four of his major sponsors.
- Lochte was suspended by the US Olympic Committee and USA Swimming for four months.
- Lochte was required to complete 20 hours of community service.
- The situation became known as “LochteGate.”

In a later interview, when asked why he had “overexaggerated” what happened, Lochte responded: “I think it’s still hours after the incident and I’m not one to make excuses but I was still intoxicated. I was still going through the emotions of having a gun pulled on me. I’m human – I made a mistake and that’s something I’m going to have to live with.”

Discussion Questions:

1. It is possible that although Lochte’s “overexaggeration” occurred several hours after the incident, intoxication might have played a role in the misstatement. Do you think that loss aversion also played a role? If so, please explain how and why.
2. Have you ever been tempted to lie in order to cover up a mistake (moral or otherwise) that you have made? Do you understand how Lochte might have felt? Explain.
3. In their book on scandals in college sports, Harper and Donnor wrote:

“People in most professions, not just college sports, would go to great lengths to save their jobs. However, it is plausible that the higher a person’s salary is, the more desperate and determined she or he is to retain that high paying job. ...The loss of a million-dollar job surely requires significant lifestyle changes—who wouldn’t protect that?”

Ryan Lochte had several million dollars of endorsement deals with Speedo, Ralph Lauren and other sponsors. Is it possible that he might have “overexaggerated” to avoid losing those revenue streams? Explain your reasoning.

4. It appears that outrage was directed at Lochte primarily because of his apparent lie rather than because of his admittedly drunken behavior. Is this evidence supporting the common viewpoint that “the cover-up is worse than the crime”? Why or why not?

5. Professor William Earnest has written that “[t]he number one reason people lie, still, is to avoid punishment and embarrassment.” Is this statement consistent with your experience? If so, how?

6. Jose Canseco, a famous baseball player who eventually admitted to using steroids to “bulk up” in violation of Major League Baseball’s guidelines wrote:

“Why do athletes choose to expose themselves to the risks and uncertainties [of steroid use]? I wish the answer was simple. In most cases the answer is surprisingly not for the fame and the money. While some may take them hoping to get an advantage, the plain answer is that most do it just to survive in their sport....They are not All-Stars and are doing it just to stay in the game and pay the bills.”

In other words, Canseco is saying that most of these athletes cheated not to gain fame and fortune, but to avoid losing their jobs. Does this sound like loss aversion to you? Explain your reasoning.

7. How can you best prepare in order to prevent feelings of loss aversion leading you to make a crucial moral mistake? Discuss.

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